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ABSTRACT

The study was conducted to determine if (1) teachers and students in education curricula with completion of a course in characteristics of handicapping conditions held more positive attitudes toward handicapped persons than those who had not completed the course and (2) if graduate students or in-service teachers held more positive attitudes toward handicapped persons than undergraduate or pre-service teachers. Processing data on the Attitudes Toward Disabled Persons Scale from 120 students using analysis of variance/(ANOVA) procedures, it was found that both graduates and undergraduates who had completed an introductory course in characterstics of exceptional children had significantly higher ($p<.05$) positive attitudes toward handicapped children. (Author/CL)

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Assessing Attitudes Toward Exceptional Children

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Running Head: ASSESSING ATTITUDES

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Abstract

This study was conducted to determine if a) teachers and students in education curricula with completion of a course in characteristics of handicapping conditions held more positive attitudes toward handicapped persons than those who had not completed the course and b) if graduate students or in-service teachers held more positive attitudes toward handicapped persons than undergraduate or pre-service teachers. Processing data from 120 students using ANOVA procedures, it was found that both graduates and undergraduates who had completed an introductory course in characteristics of exceptional children had significantly higher ($p < .05$) positive attitudes toward handicapped children.

Assessing Attitudes Toward Exceptional Children

Attitudes toward exceptional children have been the topic of many research reports. Several studies have established the existence of negative attitudes toward children and adults with physical disabilities (Aloia, 1975; Buttery, 1978). Reichel (1975) found that negative and sterotypic attitudes limit social and vocational opportunities for the exceptional. Other studies have attempted to delineate factors which bring about change in attitudes toward disabled persons in a positive direction utilizing various techniques such as panel discussions, course content, and audio and video presentations (Clore & Jeffrey, 1972; Donaldson & Martinson, 1977; Lazar, Orpet & Fogg, 1971; Rapier, Adelson, Carey & Croke, 1972; Rusalem, 1967). Wesolowski and Dickamn (1980) found that individuals with low scores on the Attitude Toward Disabled Persons Scale perceived the disabled as a deviant stimulus and experienced degrees of autonomic arousal when viewing videotapes of disabled persons; negative attitudes can be changed in a positive direction when the presentation significantly reduces the nondisabled viewer's anxiety.

More positive attitudes toward the handicapped have been reported when the degree of contact with disabled students was the dependent variable (Bishop, 1969). However, Hafer and Narcus (1979) found that the Viewing of films designed to inform and strengthen attitudes in a positive manner actually resulted in the initiation of more negative ones. Westerwelt and McKinney (1980) also concluded that a film presentation alone is not sufficient to inform subjects accurately concerning disability.

It appears that many factors may contribute to negative or positive attitudes toward handicapped persons. The major purpose of this study was to determine if educators with knowledge of characteristics of handicapping conditions held more positive attitudes toward handicapped persons than those who had not had formalized training. The major hypothesis was that special education majors completing an introductory course in "Characteristics of Exceptional Children" would have more positive attitudes than nonspecial education majors who had only informal knowledge of handicapping conditions. A minor hypothesis was that graduate students or in-service teachers would have more positive attitudes toward handicapping conditions than undergraduate students or pre-service teachers.

Methods

Subjects

One hundred twenty students selected from both general education major and special education majors were included in the study. Group I was composed of 30 graduate students majoring in special education who had just completed a 3 semester hour credit graduate level introductory course "Problems of Exceptional Children"; Group II included undergraduate students majoring in special education who had completed an undergraduate 3 semester hour credit introductory course, "Characteristics of Exceptional Children" (content of both courses encompassed individual differences of various categories of exceptional children; characteristics, educational programs, and resources for treatment); Group III consisted of graduate students with a major other than special education and no formal instruction in the area of special

education; and Group IV was comprised of undergraduate student with a major other than special education with no formal instruction in the area of special education.

Instrument

The Attitudes Toward Disabled Persons Scale (ATDP) Form O (Yuker, Black & Young, 1970) was used as a dependent measure. The ATDP measures the extent to which respondents perceive the disabled individual as being different.

The ATDP Form O contains 20 items; each item is rated on a six point Lickert type scale ranging from -3 meaning "I disagree very much" to +3 meaning "I agree very much". Varying degrees of agreement and disagreement ranging from -2, -1, +1, +2 are also available choices. There is a possible score range of 0 to 120. A low score on this instrument reveals that the respondent perceives disabled persons as being deviant and indicates less acceptance and understanding. Inversely, a high score on the instrument indicates that the respondent perceives disabled persons as not being different, which may be interpreted as being more accepting and understanding of disabled persons (Stodden, Graves & Lazare, 1973).

Procedures

All 120 subjects at a large state-supported university in the sunbelt in the United States were administered the ATDP at the end of the fall semester.

Results

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) procedures were used to process the data. A significant difference was found between groups ($F = 420$, $DF = 3, 115$, $P < .01$). Using Duncan's Multiple Range Test for Variability, it was found that both graduates and undergraduates (Groups I and II) who had

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Insert Table 1 about here

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completed a basic introductory course in characteristics of exceptional children had significantly higher ($p < .05$) positive attitudes toward handicapped children than graduate and undergraduate students with no formal training in special education (Groups III and IV). No significant difference was found between graduate students (Groups I and III) and undergraduate students (Groups II and IV).

Discussion

Educational researchers have long recognized the importance of teacher attitudes in the learning process. The findings in the present study confirm that students who have knowledge of characteristics of exceptional children hold more positive attitudes than those who do not. However, the undergraduates and graduates in this survey were also individuals who had chosen special education as their major area of training. The selection factor may have accounted for the difference in attitudes exhibited between groups.

As we move forward in providing educational services and facilitating least restrictive environment for exceptional children we must continue to explore existing attitudes toward handicapped children.

Only when we are able to ascertain what factors are indeed responsible for the attitudes held by pre-service and in-service educators, can we suggest procedures or strategies that will be instrumental in changing existing societal barriers and enhancing attitudes toward the handicapped. A monumental task, indeed!

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Table 1

Attitude Difference Between Groups

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	df	MS	F
Between Groups	2622.9	3	874.3	4.20*
Within Groups	24158.7	116	208.2	
Total	26781.7	119		

* .01